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Title

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Parental Participation in Child Protection Case Conferences

Abstract

Child protection case conferences (CPCCs) are a fundamental part of child protection processes within the UK. They provide a mechanism for professionals and families to share information, enter into an assessment dialogue and develop a plan for intervention and support. The participation of parents is a core feature of UK and Scottish CPCCs. This reflects an international trend by child protection authorities which recognises the rights of family members to participate in the decision-making processes of child protection intervention. This article reports on the analysis of eleven qualitative interviews with parents who had attended CPCCs in Scotland. The findings highlight that parents were profoundly affected by these meetings which were experienced and troubling, distressing and frightening events. Parents lacked clarity about the purposes of CPCCs despite professional efforts to provide information. The large number of professionals in attendance was experienced as both intimidating and overwhelming. The discursive practices of professionals appeared to create a climate within which professional voices were privileged and parents felt degraded and humiliated. The findings of this study raise important questions about the extent to which parents can be considered to meaningfully participate in CPCCs and suggests that it is time for change.

Keywords: child protection, child protection case conferences, parents, participation

Introduction

This article reports on parents' experiences of child protection case conferences (CPCCs) in Scotland. The data represented here have been drawn from a small-scale qualitative study which explored the lived experiences of families who were, at the time of study, subject to statutory child protection intervention. Other researchers who have explored parental experiences of these processes have commented that attendance at CPCCs is one of the most vividly recollected aspects of intervention (Dale, 2004). Our decision to present the findings around parents' experiences of CPCCs reflects this. There are few published studies which report on parental experiences of CPCCs and a paucity of recent work exists. This is unsurprising. The lived experiences of highly vulnerable families are rarely explored from a research perspective and their voices are seldom heard (Morris and Featherstone, 2010). The findings of this study contribute to a contemporary understanding of how parents experience the CPCC mechanism within statutory child protection process.

Child Protection Case Conferences in Scotland

Child protection case conferences (CPCCs) are a fundamental part of child protection processes within the UK. CPCCs are usually convened where a child protection investigation has taken place and/or an assessment which raises serious concerns about a child has taken place and/or where an allegation of abuse or neglect has been made. CPCCs provide a mechanism for professionals and families to share information, enter an assessment dialogue and develop a plan for intervention and support (Lagaay and Courtney, 2013) about a child who is considered to be at risk of significant harm through abuse or neglect (Scottish Government, 2014). Within Scotland, the Scottish Government's (2014) National Guidance for Child Protection provides the framework for child protection policy, practice and procedure. The guidance identifies that the core purpose of the CPCC is to protect children (including unborn children) and young people and identify if the child is at risk of significant harm. The CPCC provides a mechanism through which services and agencies can share information relating to that child, consider the risks to the child, review existing plans for that child and/or develop a multi-agency child protection plan to reduce risk (Scottish Government, 2014:99). The decision whether the child's name should be placed on the local authority child protection register is taken within initial CPCCs. The child protection register is a confidential record of the details of children who have been identified as being at risk and in need of a multi-agency child protection plan. If the CPCC considers that the criterion for

registration has been met then the child will become subject to a child protection plan (Prince, et al., 2005). Further CPCCs will then be held at regular intervals until the child is either removed into the care of the local authority or is no longer considered at risk of significant harm.

The guidance clearly articulates that parents (and children where appropriate) should participate in CPCCs. The guidance stipulates that CPCCs should seek and consider the views of parents and children. CPCCs are required to invite parents (and children where appropriate) to CPCCs unless there are significant reasons for exclusion. Chairs are directed to create a dialogical space for parents/children to express their views and ensure they are provided with appropriate information and support to enable this. Where a parent or child cannot attend, processes should be put in place to represent their views (Scottish Government, 2014: 99 & 105).

Parental Participation in Child Protection Contexts

The ethos of parental participation is generally understood to have emerged in the period between the late 1970s and early 1990s in response to heightened public, media and political concern about how professionals were responding to cases of child abuse. Marked by a series of child abuse scandals and public inquiries which scrutinised the practices of social workers; the client-worker relationship emerged as a source of concern alongside contested ideas about the place of parents within professional processes. Throughout, the enduring and unresolved complexities and tensions inherent in balancing the ambiguous relationships between children, parents, professionals, professional agencies and the state in the context of a liberal democracy emerged as salient theme.

The period between the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 at the hands of her step-father and the Cleveland Child Abuse Inquiry in 1987 resulted in the distancing of social workers and parents in an attempt to mitigate against the consequences of professionals forming inappropriately 'close' helping alliances with parents. The death of Maria Colwell highlighted serious concerns in relation to the failure of professionals to intervene to protect children. Social workers were accused of working with families from a liberal democratic standpoint that was too permissive, and which resulted in a lack of action. The consequence of this was a shift towards a more intrusive approach to intervention; the predisposition to which was embedded in the provisions of the subsequent Children Act 1975 (Parton, 1979). Whether this happened in practice was much debated. For example, Parton (1985) cites

evidence from official statistics that reported increased numbers of children in care as suggestive of a shift. Thorburn (1992:11) comments that there was a focus on 'child rescue' and the use of 'authority'. On the other hand, Corby (1993) indicates that there was a demonstrable professional reticence towards a more intrusive approach and a retained preference for working with parents.

Scandals and inquiries continued – most notably the Beckford Inquiry - followed in 1987 by the Henry and Carlile cases. These reinforced the view that professionals were failing to intervene and properly execute their statutory duties (Parton, 1991). A lack of authoritative practice and a focus on parents as compared to children was situated as problematic. In the aftermath of this a refocusing on the 'child' as the proper object of concern for social workers was invoked.

By contrast, The Cleveland Child Abuse Inquiry in 1988 contributed to forcing the participation debate in a different direction. Against the backdrop of a regime with an embedded rhetoric of intrusive practice, social workers were accused of 'over-intervention'. The inquiry scrutinised the practices both of medics and of social workers who over a period of few weeks had removed over a hundred children from their families. The basis for removal which was premised upon the diagnosis of child abuse was subjected to a deep analysis. The failure of professionals to recognise the rights of parents in the context of questionable professional decision-making and actions emerged as a central concern. This incited debate over the civil liberties of parents and influenced the emergence of the parents' lobby which campaigned for the right for parents to participate in decisions affecting the care of their child/ren (Parton, 2006). The findings and recommendations of the inquiry highlighted the importance of including families in the child protection decision making process. It specifically emphasised that parents should be informed and consulted by professionals, informed of their rights and provided with support (Butler-Sloss, 1988). This included the recommendation that parents should have the right to participate in the decision making processes of CPCCs.

The 1989 Children Act and the guidance that followed in Working Together (DoH, 1991) embedded the principle of parental participation into official discourse emphasising 'negotiation' with and the 'involvement' of parents [and children] (Parton, 2006:38). The principle of participation was expressed through the idea of working in 'partnership' with families. The Cleveland Inquiry shifted thinking on the participation of parents within child

protection processes. This had also been influenced by the Orkney child abuse scandal in 1991. The scandal in Orkney shared similarities with Cleveland insofar as professionals were again accused of over-intervention in the context of removing children from their families.

Early Research

At the same time as these events were unfolding, academic social workers were raising questions about the rights of parents to be involved in decision making about their child/ren (Atherton, 1986; Berry, 1988; Corby, 1987). A small but impactful number of landmark studies exploring family involvement in UK child protection processes had also emerged. While many of these studies focused on family participation more generally (e.g. Thorburn, Lewis & Shemmings, 1995; Thorburn and Lewis, 1992; Thorburn, 1992; Thorburn, 1995) others more directly addressed parental involvement in CPCCs (e.g. BASPCAN, 1986; McGloin and Turnbull, 1986; Macaskill & Ashworth, 1995). Studies which focused on CPCCs revealed mixed views from professionals around parental participation. However, studies which focused on the experiences of families concluded that involving parents in the arrangements for the care/protection of their children was likely to generate more satisfactory outcomes. These emphasised that professionals should work with parents (Thorburn, 1992).

Critical Strands

While the disposition towards parental participation has a long a complex history within the UK, it reflects a more general trend by westernised child welfare authorities to take cognisance of the rights of family members to participate in the decision-making processes of child protective agencies (Healy, et al., 2012). In common parlance however the concept of parental participation is often treated unproblematically. Existing critiques have drawn out some of the difficulties associated with operationalising a participatory paradigm within a system wherein complex entanglements and tensions exist between the investigatory focus of child protection practices and democratically informed rights-based discourses of service user participation. Working within the Australian context, Healy's work has provided a thoroughgoing analysis of these tensions and has highlighted the ways in which the participatory paradigm in child protection invokes a reductionist conceptualisation of participation which is not fit for purpose given the forensic and adversarial nature of child protection systems (Healy & Darlington, 2009; Healy et al, 2012; Healy et al, 2012). Similar observations and commentaries have existed within the UK context for some time. Corby et al, (1996) for example, emphasised the weaknesses of participatory discourses within child

protection contexts, emphasising that the adversarial nature of child protection rendered the translation of participatory ideas as inherently difficult.

More recently, Healy & Venables (2018) have presented a convincing argument to replace participatory concepts with ideas drawn from procedural justice theory which emphasise the value of working with concepts such as procedural fairness and respect for individuals and their dignity within a relational framework. While Healy & Venables (2018) illustrate well how these concepts can be operationalised in contexts where parents enter into collaborative arrangements with child protection professions on a voluntary basis (intervention with parental agreement) as an alternative to statutory intervention; the application of a practice framework underpinned by procedural justice theory may provide a more appropriate approach to working meaningfully ‘with’ parents in child protection contexts.

Existing Research

Contemporary studies of parental participation in CPCCs have consistently concluded that parents have little influence on the decision-making processes of CPCCs (Buckley, et al., 2011). Studies report that parents tend to contribute very little to CPCC discussions unless they are explicitly guided to do so (Hall and Slembrouck, 2001) or that they find CPCCs a problematic context in which to express their views (Ghafter, et al., 2012). Meaningful participation has been considered to be constrained by the discursive practices of professionals (Hall & Slembrouck, 2001; Buckley, et al., 2011), which allow professional voices to dominate and the higher value placed on professional forms of evidence which parents can find difficult to contest (Richardson, 2003; Ingerslev, 1999). CPCCs, Smithson and Gibson (2016:3) consider that these kinds of parental experiences are indicative of a ‘highly authoritative approach to practice’.

Attendance at CPCCs and particularly initial CPCCs, are frequently reported in the findings of studies as distressing and disempowering experiences for parents (Buckley et al., 2011; Dale, 2004; Healy et al., 2012). The adversarial and hierarchical nature of CPCCs, the emotional impact of the presence of a large number of professionals, quasi-legal practices and a lack of understanding, have been considered to interact to create a distressing experience for parents (Healy et al., 2011 & 2012; Buckley, et al., 2011; Dale, 2004; Prince et al., 2005; Thomson & Thorpe, 2004).

Research has however demonstrated that practitioners are committed to the values that underpin the concept of participation (Bell, 1999) and that client involvement in decision making is a more ethical and effective practice model (Buckley et al., 2011). Nonetheless, research has revealed that parents are marginalised within child protection process with restricted opportunities for participation (Barford and Wattam, 1991; Barford, 1993; Corby, Millar and Young, 1996) despite efforts by professionals to include parents (Bell, 1996).

The Current Study

The National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland (2014) outlines the principles and standards for effective practice and stipulates family participation as fundamental to achieving good working relationships with families. Operationally, this is translated within the guidance as ensuring that families are listened to, that their views are respected and considered in decision making, that their privacy and dignity is respected, and that processes, decisions and actions are explained sensitively, taking into account the particular communication needs of individuals. These dimensions of participative engagement underpinned the focus of the study. The primary objectives of the study were centred upon establishing the extent to which processes of information, support and inclusion aimed at facilitating participation met participatory aims. Central to this was a concern with exploring the extent to which participants felt that their ‘voices’ were included, listened to and heard. While we worked within these definitional parameters in our approach to participation in the context of this study; we did so with an acute awareness of the difficulties of operationalising participatory concepts in statutory contexts.

Study Objectives

This study reports on the analysis of qualitative interviews with eleven parents and one grandparent who was in a parental role. Seven of the parents interviewed were mothers and four were fathers. At the time of the study, the participants all had children who were currently registered. At the time of the study 2% of children in Scotland were either in the care of the local authority or recorded in the child protection register. Registration rates typically vary between local authorities with higher rates in the West of Scotland where this study was situated. At this time of this study registration rates typically varied between 0.3

per 1,000 children and 5.2 per 1,000 children. Registration rates in the study site were at the higher end of this range (Scottish Government, 2019).

Participants from this study were identified through the local authority child protection register. There are some considerations that require to be communicated in relation to this. Firstly, in selecting participants we were dependent on professional knowledge and understanding of the families involved. This was drawn upon in order to ensure that families who were considered too vulnerable to participate were not approached. There were also considerations made in relation to the appropriateness of research intrusion. There were no attempts to stratify the sample or to develop a sampling strategy that was representative of the population of families undergoing statutory intervention at the time of the study. The processes of negotiating access and gaining informed consent was carried out by the funding local authority with ethical guidance and support from the research team. Ethical permission for the study was granted by the researchers' university research ethics committee.

Methods

Data Collection

Our approach to interviewing participants around these issues fused aspects of 'thematic' and 'narrative' interviewing. Thematic interviewing typically characterises standard based approaches to in-depth interviews. Semi-structured schedules which aim to generate comparable data across several interviews are routinely used (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Because the data collection instrument is structured around researcher concerns, this approach to interviewing can impose a powerful conceptual grid upon the data. Hence, one of the objectives of qualitative research - to privilege participant voices – (Mazzei & Jackson, 2009) can be compromised. As qualitative researchers with a commitment to the centrality of voice we incorporated elements of narration-based interview techniques to provide a dialogical space for participants to express aspects of experience that were of importance to them. Narration based approaches seek to facilitate and encourage participants to freely structure their accounts (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). Given the study's focus on participatory experiences and 'voice' the adoption of an interviewing approach which was cognisant of voice was methodologically critical.

In our interviewing practice therefore, we adopted a broad and loosely formulated thematic approach. The study interviews were designed to explore the participatory experiences of

parents. This began with us posing a very general open question which asked participants to describe their experiences of involvement and allowed us to transfer control of the interview to the participant. Such an approach requires researchers to work co-constructively with participants to introduce and combine lines of inquiry from the topic guide while respecting the participant's narrative space and ownership of their 'story'. Similar approaches to interviewing which fuse thematic and narration-based approaches have been (C.F. Scheibelhofer, 2008)

Data Analysis

The data analysis strategy was developed to overcome the challenges of analysing data that had both narrative and thematic properties. Techniques that focus on story reconstruction are widely drawn upon in the analysis of narrative data, whereas data generated from thematic interviews tend to be analysed through the application of thematic analysis techniques. In the latter, the interview schedule provides the initial framework for first-level coding. As a research team the development of an analysis strategy presented challenges as well as opportunities. Analytical approaches that involve the micro-analysis of interview data as text did not appeal to us. As a research team our commitment to 'voice' has orientated us away from the analysis of 'voice' represented as text. It is our preference to apply analytical strategies that also involve attending to dimensions of 'voice' that are not accessible in text. Hence, our practice is to also work and interact directly with audio data. This allows us to access and interpret a range of voice features such as tone, inclination, volume, pitch and silence as well as the emotional dimensions of narratives.

We retained our practice of working with 'voice' as both sound and text. We did not however want to lose the power of narrative analytical techniques that aim for story reconstruction nor the benefits of thematic analysis. Both techniques were therefore applied. In the first instance, our analysis began with the application of narrative techniques to sound and text data moving iteratively between both to identify macro-level features within the data as 'stories'. It is recognised that analysis of narration-based data is challenging. Such data is apt to be esoteric and comparison between cases can be difficult. Our first-level analysis revealed that participant narratives were characterised by 'chaos' and defied the structural features associated with narratives. We were required therefore to [re]construct a meaningful narrative out of 'chaos'. Our first-level analysis revealed that participants constructed their stories around what we termed 'significant events', 'significant moments' and

‘transformational episodes’. These tended not to be presented in order of occurrence but recursively at different points within the ‘story’. These ‘paths’ within the data provided the framework which guided our second level analysis. Three researchers worked with this data. The main analyst was not involved in the interview process however the interviewing researcher worked with sections of the data alongside a third analyst to provide a level of analytical triangulation. The findings represented below focus upon the analysis of CPCCs as ‘significant events’

Findings

The Emotional Impact of CPCCs

Akin to the findings of other studies, parents were troubled and distressed by their experiences of attending CPCCs. Revisiting their experiences of CPCCs was, for most parents, clearly distressing and invoked a range of intense emotions. CPCC meetings were recalled with sadness, confusion, dismay, bewilderment, shame and most notably anger. Parents discussed feeling humiliated and intimidated by their experiences but most frequently they talked about being scared and frightened before, during and after meetings. For example, on being asked about how they experienced CPCCs one parent quite simply stated:

‘Frightening.’ Parent 9, Father

For most, CPCCs were painful and uncomfortable experiences within which parents felt degraded, disempowered and bereft of a sense of dignity. Professional communication with parents within these meetings appeared to contribute to creating a climate within which parents felt both degraded and humiliated. Several parents experienced professional talk directed towards them as chastising. For example:

‘The way I see it...I am maybe picking it up all wrong but the way I see it you were just taken in they were bringing us down to that size. The way they were speaking to us you just felt that size.’ Parent 1, Mother

And:

‘A lot times at these meetings it is like speaking to a dog it is like, it is really degrading it’s like ‘the reason you are in here is because you are failures as

parents’ and like it is whoah we know we have done wrong but I don’t need that flung at me in my face you know you are failures as parents.’ Parent 2, Father

In their communication, parents felt that professionals focused upon reprimanding their ‘failed parenting’ such that CPCCs were interpreted by parents as disciplinary mechanisms. Their sense of agency as participants within the decision- making process was eroded by professional actions that were perceived to be punitive but legitimate. For example, one of the fathers quoted above continued to state:

‘...obviously they have to be strict and that because some people just don’t listen.’ Parent 2, Father

Parents also discussed the ways in which professionals ‘talked about’ rather than ‘talked to’ them. For example, a grandfather discussed a police officer talking about his son in derogatory terms which angered him:

‘He was talking X down as if he was scum you know. It wasn’t nice.’ Grandfather

1

Another father expressed anger at being talked about and labelled as violent:

‘It is like I am a violent man.’ Parent 2, Father

The way in which professionals talked to and talked about parents within CPCCs had a profound impact upon these parents. Moreover, what remained salient in the narratives of parents were concerns around the lack of professional recognition that they had the capacity for self-reflective thought.

Some parents articulated that when professionals ‘talked about’ them they did not understand the discussions. For example, when asked about her level of understanding around professional discussions and her ability to contribute and share her views one parent commented:

‘I don’t know what they sit and speak about.’ Parent 8, Mother

This mother communicated that she struggled to understand professional talk ‘about her’ at CPCCs. She also found it difficult to make sense of the reasons for statutory intervention beyond a recognition that she was considered an ‘unfit parent’.

Looking Back

A professional focus on past histories and events was identified as problematic. For instance, the father who was talked about as a 'violent man' discussed the extent to which past convictions and behaviours were focused upon by professionals:

'The past comes back to bite you on the bum basically. You are only human you are going to make mistakes. It as if they are still judging you as this boy you were when you were young. When it's like I am not that boy. It is like I am a violent man and it's like I'm not a violent man, I was a young daft boy but I'm not a violent man I have grown up. They should look at me since the kids were born.' Parent 2, Father

This father did however express the view that whilst he found these meetings difficult, he also found aspects of them useful. Nonetheless, he suggested that professionals should use a more future focused and encouraging approach:

'I do appreciate the feedback at the meetings. I like to hear opinions about how the kids are getting on... but I think it should be more trying to encourage and saying look listen you know yourself you have done wrong the only thing you can do is try to make it better instead of being a failure as a parent.' Parent 2, Father

Professional Betrayal

Most of the parents had prolonged histories of social work involvement. Existing good relationships with professionals were damaged by the CPCC processes. This was most saliently expressed where parents considered that they had been 'misled' or 'misinformed' by professionals. Parents described 'professional betrayals' which violated their trust in professionals:

'It was like walking in to a room full of people you thought you could trust like the health visitor, teacher...before the meeting I thought I could trust them...they went round all the room and they all recommended that the children be taken into care...we were surprised because we still thought there would be a way round it.'

Parent 9, Father

Understandings of the Purpose of CPCCs

Parents communicated a rudimentary understanding of the purpose of CPCCs as being the mechanism through which major decisions were made, most notably in relation to the registration of children. The purpose of the meeting appeared to be primarily understood as centred upon the activity of keeping or removing children from the register:

‘We got told what it was going to be about and what we were going to speak about and if we were to stay on the register or get off it.’ Parent 4, Mother

There was also a general lack of clarity about the purposes of registration and the register:

‘I didn’t understand at all how they got on the register. What is the register?’
Parent 2, Father

And:

‘I didn’t understand what it all meant...children being in the register.’ Parent 8, Mother

The registration of their children was understood by parents as being linked to their ‘failed parenting’ and monitoring their parenting. In talking about the register parents did not invoke the language of risk and protection. Neither did they discuss the role of planning and intervention in a meaningful or coherent way. CPCCs were understood as forums within which their parenting was questioned and monitored by professionals who made judgements about their parenting. Hence, achieving deregistration was identified as a goal. Parents considered therefore that their primary task within the child protection process was to convince professionals that their parenting practices had improved or had been good all along. Making sense of how to convince professionals that their parenting was good featured in the narratives of parents.

Despite these issues and expressing views which indicated that parents struggled to reach a comprehensive understanding of the purpose of CPCCs, most parents did describe efforts by professionals to inform them and prepare them:

‘Yes, we got told all about it. We got told everything what was happening at that. I knew everything near enough what was going to be said at meetings.’
Grandfather 1

However, despite professional efforts, parents lacked clarity over the purposes of the CPCC. One parent stated that her partner and herself did not have this explained to them. For example:

‘We didn’t know anything about it we never got told anything that was going to be discussed in the meeting.’ Parent 8, Mother

One parent did discuss how difficult it was to process information provided by professionals at a time where emotions were charged. Comprehending written information was identified as difficult:

‘The last thing you want to do is sit and read when your kids have just been taken from you...the last thing you want to read is all this.’ Parent 1, Mother

Professional Presence

All parents expressed the view that there were too many professionals present at meetings. The impact of a large number of professionals was discussed by all. Parents understood why so many professionals were present and most reported that this had been explained, however they found this difficult and intimidating:

‘It was too much. There were three desks all lined up and there were folk all the way round it. There were police everything, teachers, social workers all in a row...It was scary, really scary.’ Parent 1, mother

Parents felt that CPCCs became less intimidating as their involvement progressed. They also offered suggestions to reduce feelings of intimidation. For example, one parent suggested that meeting professionals prior to the CPCC or requesting that professionals entered the meeting room after them would be less intimidating than being brought into the room once everyone else had settled.

Expressing Views

Some parents did feel that they were able to express their views and that efforts were sought to seek their opinions:

‘Everyone gets their own say...we say what we think should happen.’ Parent 4, mother

‘They do always ask your thoughts and you get to explain.’ Parent 2, Father

The structure of meetings appeared to influence the extent to which parents were able to contribute. For example, parents found it difficult to respond to professionals if they had to wait until each professional had spoken stating that they found it difficult to process the information presented. Where parents were able to respond to each professional in turn their participatory experiences were enhanced.

Challenging Professional Views and Information

Parents understood that CPCCs facilitated a range of professionals and parents to express their views. Parents felt however that it was difficult to challenge professional views and information. For example, one parent discussed how one professional gave an account of the ‘scruffiness’ of his daughter’s presentation during a home visit which he disagreed with and felt unable to challenge. Another discussed that it was difficult to challenge inaccurate information. Parents experienced professional accounts as being granted a higher status. Consequently, they felt that their views were unheard.

Changing Practice

The research team involved in this study worked collaboratively with the funding authority to consider how to embed the study findings in practice. This involved careful and supportive dissemination of the research findings which recognised the difficult tensions and challenges that practitioner’s face in carrying out their legal duties to protect children. This process involved working with practitioners to understand their experiences of these challenges and considering this in relation to our findings. These processes were workshop based and were focused on considering how parent’s experiences could be enhanced whilst retaining the integrity of the function of the CPCC. Consequently, the authority made a range of structural changes to CPCCs. Some of these changes were minor and included; reconfiguring the meeting room to reduce the judicial atmosphere, settling parents within the room before professionals and inviting parents to respond to the inputs of professionals one at a time. Small, changes such as these have the potential to make a meaningful difference to parents. They can also positively impact on a parent’s felt sense of being treated with dignity, fairness and respect in a context which needs to retain a focus on the care, welfare and protection of children.

Discussion

Research suggests that there have been enduring difficulties in creating the conditions for participation in CPCCs. We consider that this connects in part to a failure to grapple with the concept of participation in child protection contexts or to take cognisance of contemporary critiques which render visible the weaknesses of the participatory paradigm. The current study has brought to the fore the enduring nature of these weaknesses. It has highlighted the ways in which the discursive practices and bureaucratic arrangements of CPCCs act to restrict meaningful participation and marginalise the voices of parents. The discursive and disciplinary structures of CPCCs appeared to privilege the voices of professionals over the voices of parents who found it difficult to express their views, respond to and challenge professional opinion. Parents communicated difficulties in expressing their viewpoints and responding to professional dialogue in a context which they found intimidating, distressing and humiliating. The hierarchical positioning of expert knowledge within CPCCs was viscerally felt by parents.

As a site for participation the CPCC is, of course, an involuntary space. At best, it can be conceptualised as an ‘invited space for participation’ (Hickey and Mohan, 2004:35) at worst it could be positioned as a disciplinary site in which the terms and methods of participation align with and promote professional dialogue, knowledge and decision-making framed by statutory power. Clearly, what our findings revealed is that this is how parents experience CPCCs – as disciplinary sites where discursive practices can be theorised as functioning to marginalise their views and where fear and shame related emotions operate and are experienced as mechanisms for punishment, regulation and control.

We are mindful that this is a small-scale study which was undertaken in a small local authority within Scotland. Hence, we do not wish to overstate our findings and suggestions for change nor assume that these translate readily to other contexts. Neither do we wish to conclude our discussion without acknowledging that the central purpose of the child protection case conference is resolutely focused upon the care, welfare and protection of children where there are serious concerns about abuse and /or neglect. There is within such a mechanism considerable challenges to finding ways of working that balance and place as paramount the need to safeguard children from forms of harm with practices that respectfully involve parents in the decision-making process. On an international basis, these challenges have led to alternative ways of working with parents where there are child protection concerns. Models which emphasise ideas of ‘collaborative intervention’ rather than participation are for example gaining momentum (Venables & Healy, 2018). Approaches such

as these have required a reconfiguration of how child protection systems respond to concerns about risk. In the US for example, the ‘differential response’ system embeds a move away from a forensic approach where it is considered safe to do so and embeds a family assessment model which leverages a strengths-based perspective to engage a child’s network of care in their welfare and protection (Schene, 2005). Venables & Healy’s recent (2018) study traces out the ways in which the ‘intervention with parental agreement’ approach is working to address child protection concerns without resorting to statutory intervention unless it is considered necessary to do so.

Conclusion

Academics do not always take active steps to work in partnership with practitioners to translate and embed messages from research into practice. When researchers and practitioners come together in partnership it is clearly possible to make evidence-based changes. The impact of research upon practice depends upon academics engaging meaningfully and respectfully with practitioners. Previous research which has reported similar findings to this study appears to have struggled to make an impact upon the practices and processes that characterise CPCCs. While we have highlighted above that the findings of this study have not varied considerably from that of others what we consider has been different about our study has been the commitment to embedding practice changes that place as central the voices of participants in the process of change and which positions partnership working with practitioners as key mechanism through which research can effect change. What is – or what should be – distinctive about social work research is a commitment to learn from service users and contribute to social work knowledge and practice (Shaw, 2007). Although we cannot state this with any certainty, it is reasonable to assume that the enduring difficulties in creating meaningful changes within CPCC practices and processes may well be anchored in a lack of action to translate and embed messages from research in practice contexts. We would therefore urge social work researchers to consider what steps they need to take to ensure that the research they produce has a meaningful impact.

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